

A summer without jobs for America's youth

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This summer, only about one in four US teenagers will hold a job, down from one in two fifteen years ago. The decline in employment for teenagers is a major component of the mass joblessness that continues in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Despite six years of what has been officially billed an economic “recovery,” the share of teenagers who are employed has barely budged since the depths of the recession. A study published by Drexel University in May notes that despite a nominal improvement in the official unemployment rate, the prevalence of mass unemployment for teenagers points to “Depression Era-like labor market problems.”

With the 2016 presidential election campaign well underway, neither the media nor the top candidates of the two establishment parties bother to mention that there are no summer jobs for millions of young people and virtually unprecedented levels of youth unemployment. As far as they are concerned, it is a non-issue.

Not too long ago, summer jobs programs, though limited and inadequate, were considered to be an essential responsibility of the government. Now, such programs have all but disappeared.

The elimination of these programs, like other Great Society social reforms, is bound up with the decay of American capitalism, the rightward lurch of both corporate-controlled parties, deindustrialization and the ascendancy of a parasitic financial aristocracy.

The share of youth ages 16-19 working during the summer months has fallen from nearly 52 percent in 2000 to less than 27 percent today, according to the Drexel study. Year-round employment for teenagers has dropped from 45 percent to 27 percent over the same period.

Teen unemployment is particularly concentrated among low-income and minority youth. Less than 20 percent of youth from homes with annual incomes lower than \$20,000 had a summer job in 2014, compared to 41 percent from homes with incomes higher than \$100,000. Last year, only 19 percent of black teenagers had a summer job, compared to 34 percent of white teenagers.

A number of interrelated processes account for the dramatic fall in teenage employment. Amid persistent joblessness and falling wages, older workers are desperate to take any job they can, including those previously available to teenagers. Employers, demanding ever-greater productivity and flexibility from their workers, are less willing to accommodate young peoples' school schedules, while growing numbers of young people are working for free in unpaid internships.

But the most significant factor in the decline of summer employment is the collapse in funding for summer jobs programs, particularly at the federal level. In 1999, federal subsidies made up 82 percent of funding for New York City's summer jobs program. This summer, the federal government's contribution is zero.

President Obama, despite having campaigned as a champion of young people, has allowed federal funding for jobs programs to decline year after year, particularly since the 2013 imposition of the “sequester” budget cuts.

Conditions today for working class youth in cities like Detroit, Baltimore, New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and elsewhere are no better than those that were so brilliantly and movingly described in Depression-era novels such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Nearly one in four people under the age of 18 in the United States lives in a family below the federal poverty line. A total of 16.3 million Americans under 18 live in poverty, and one in five children and young people live in households where there is not enough to eat.

This is in a country where the number of billionaires grows by leaps and bounds and the top 1 percent monopolizes ever-larger shares of the national income and wealth.

Education spending, like funding for jobs programs, is being slashed at every level of government. In 2015, states plan to spend \$1,805 per student on higher education, 20 percent less than before the recession. Five states have slashed their higher education funding by more than 35 percent since 2008, with Arizona cutting its spending by 47 percent.

The ever-growing cost of higher education is making college inaccessible to millions of low-income students. Student debt has skyrocketed, with the average member of the class of 2015 graduating with more than \$35,000 in debt.

Is it any wonder, under conditions of social blight and mass unemployment, that street crime and gang-related violence are on the rise in impoverished urban neighborhoods, as illustrated by the string of shootings that killed eight people over the weekend in Chicago?

Nor is it difficult to grasp the connection between such conditions and the transformation of local police into militarized occupation forces, employing deadly violence to suppress the social anger boiling just below the surface of society.

Chicago police superintendent Garry McCarthy declared in response to this weekend's shootings that the police need to make "criminals... feel the repercussions of the justice system." In Detroit, Police Chief James Craig has referred to the city's youth as "urban terrorists." Such statements reflect the complete inability of the present social order to address any social problem.

Today's youth are the first generation in the US whose living standards have declined, in absolute terms, compared to those of their parents. The health of a society can be measured by the prospects it holds out for young people. By that standard, the conditions facing youth in America—and, indeed, in countries around the world—are an indictment of the capitalist system.



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